

2016

Fragmented Places

Saulat Ajmal

Virginia Commonwealth University, ajmals@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4271>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Fragmented Places

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts (concentration: Painting and Printmaking), at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

Saulat Ajmal

MFA, Painting & Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2016

Bachelors of Fine Arts, Painting, Hunter College, New York, NY
2012

Bachelors of Arts, Fine Arts and Sociology, Hunter College, New York, NY
2006

Committee Members: Arnold J. Kemp, Gregory Volk, Holly Morrison
Department Of Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia

May 2016

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the faculty of Painting and Printmaking for their time and support, especially my thesis reader Arnold J. Kemp and my committee members Gregory Volk, and Holly Morrison. I also want to add a special mention for Dr. Robert Hobbs for his guidance and invaluable feedback.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Saif Tariq for his countless hours of travel to visit me in Richmond over these past two years and for his unending love.

FRAGMENTED PLACES**Table of Contents**

Abstract	V
Introduction.....	1
Creating My Own.....	2
Clues	4
Performance	9
Painting.....	16
Fragmented Places	19
Religious Identity And The Double Consciousness.....	23
The Adventures Of Amir Hamza.....	28
Conclusion.....	34
Bibliography	40

List of Figures

1. AP, Armstrong, Neil, Man's landing on the Moon, 1969
1. Atomicheritage.org, Levi, Charles, Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings, 1965
2. Turkey Reuters, Syrian child washed ashore, 2015
3. Addams, Eddie, Shooting a citizen in the Vietnam war, 1972
4. Reuters, Adair, Sean, Attack on the Twin Towers, 2001
5. Rembrandt van Rijn, Bathsheba at her Bath, Oil on canvas, 56"x 56", 1654
6. Red Scape, video still, 6 min 14 sec (loop)
7. Gold Scape, video still, 5 min 49 sec (loop)
8. Serenity, ink and acrylic, 72" x 96", 2016
9. Secrets, shellac, tar and acrylic. 8"x 8", 2016
10. Diptych, gold black sumi Ink, 6"x 8", 2016
11. Arghan Dev brings the chest of armor to Hamza, gouache on paper, 67.5cm x 52.5cm, c1570
12. Persevere, ink, 71" x 95", 2016
13. Silence, ink and acrylic, 15" x 10", 2015
14. Detail, Silence enlarged, 14" x 8.5", 2016
15. Time, tea, 20" x 30", 2015
16. Presence, gouache, 8.5" x 14", 2016
17. Dew, ink, 8.5" x 11", 2015
18. Installation Shots, 2016

ABSTRACT

My work is about an inner struggle, which stems from the shifting nature of my own identity being constantly displaced and re-imagined. My paintings and performances are propositions for a utopic world. They offer a place for identity to rest and are defined through ritualistic movements, which are inescapably mine. While I work in several mediums including paintings, performance, installation and sculpture, this thesis paper is an exploration of the work I have produced specifically over the last six months.

INTRODUCTION

My work deals with individualistic forms that have developed over time in my practice. These forms travel from one medium to the other, constantly swinging between figuration and abstraction. Through these gestures, I look to create my own abstract vocabulary, which mimics my inner quest for a form of expression. In travelling from performance to painting, the forms are constantly displaced, but their struggle for identity through displacement remains true to my own concerns; concerns of being a Muslim, immigrant woman in a post-colonial and post 9/11 world. The organic, feminine, persevering movement of the forms gets carried across mediums to create a lineage of their own meanings that then constantly refer back to me.

The struggle depicted in the slow and controlled, yet organic movement of the body within the confines of the stitched fabric costumes in the performances is not choreographed, just as the arabesque forms and spills of paint in the painting are not illustrated. The movement of the hand follows an automatic turn of the wrist that reacts to the form created right before it and recreates from the subconscious. In a similar manner, each successive movement of my body within the fabric costume is an automatic response to the movement that came right before it. An instinct and memory of a certain kind takes over, creating the sort of ritualistic movement which is performed without an end in mind.

This thesis attempts to discuss my work through historical, sociological and theoretical references, which help define the nature of my work and therefore, my concerns around the concepts of identity, both relating to the self and that of culture.

CREATING MY OWN

I am constantly trying to rationalize my position within this world given the current political and cultural landscape. My engagement with the arts as a woman from a traditional, patriarchal society has been a journey that started with my childhood and took a sharp turn when I moved from Pakistan to the United States. It wasn't until I looked back towards my origins with a perspective around all that surrounded me that I stood to question a lot of what I had grown up with and to locate a sense of self. In an endeavor to place myself between my present environment and my past, I look for ways to fabricate a new reality where tradition, culture, politics and nature come together in ways that speak to my state of being.

My work is historically tied to my identity to the extent of pulling from traditional and cultural references. However, my paintings, performances and installations come from an internal, private realm where fact and fiction fuse to allow for a new reality to emerge; one that is completely autobiographical. They represent a need to express the inner struggles that exist in my life: struggles that arise from displacement, of being a woman originating from a patriarchal society, a Muslim in a world with growing religious strife and the questions of identity that follow.

My sensibility has been shaped and reshaped over time through my experiences of growing up in a traditional eastern environment and then moving to the west as an immigrant in my adult life. Personal impressions of my identity, and how external factors such as religion, culture, gender and society have constantly remodeled it, is what I address through my work. Entrikin argues that "modern cultures, like modern identities,

are fragmented.”¹

In order to understand and deal with diversity in today’s globalized world we tend to generalize entire populations. This is countered through defining my own perceptions of self, by making work that speaks of my own specific concerns; work that pulls together fragments of tradition as well as my own contemporary experience.

My work draws from miniature painting, Islamic art and patterns as well as cultural symbols to contemporize the traditional, through form and function. In the endeavor to forge a relationship between my past and present, I look for ways to fabricate a new reality where nature, culture and the self are represented through the language of beauty and nostalgia towards a political end.

In essence, I strive to make work that is as private and individual as it is publicly accessible, negotiating between what is revealed and what is hidden. I consider this quest of unveiling the self a spiritual endeavor that defines me as an individual. This practice, interestingly, makes my work universal in effect; as every individual living in civilized society is shaped by the history and culture of their surroundings. To get closer to how I see myself, the word ‘fragmented’ comes to mind as I navigate the world and assert my own identity as a woman, a Muslim, an immigrant and an individual. Living in a world plagued with constant war, religious and ethnic strife and racial discrimination; diversity insists on co-habitation, not homogenization of entire populations. This is where the need for the individual to be identified and asserted is more necessary than ever before, so we can slow down and reflect on the ‘one’ rather than rush to generalize. Thus, I feel it most necessary for my art to take a stance and assert my own

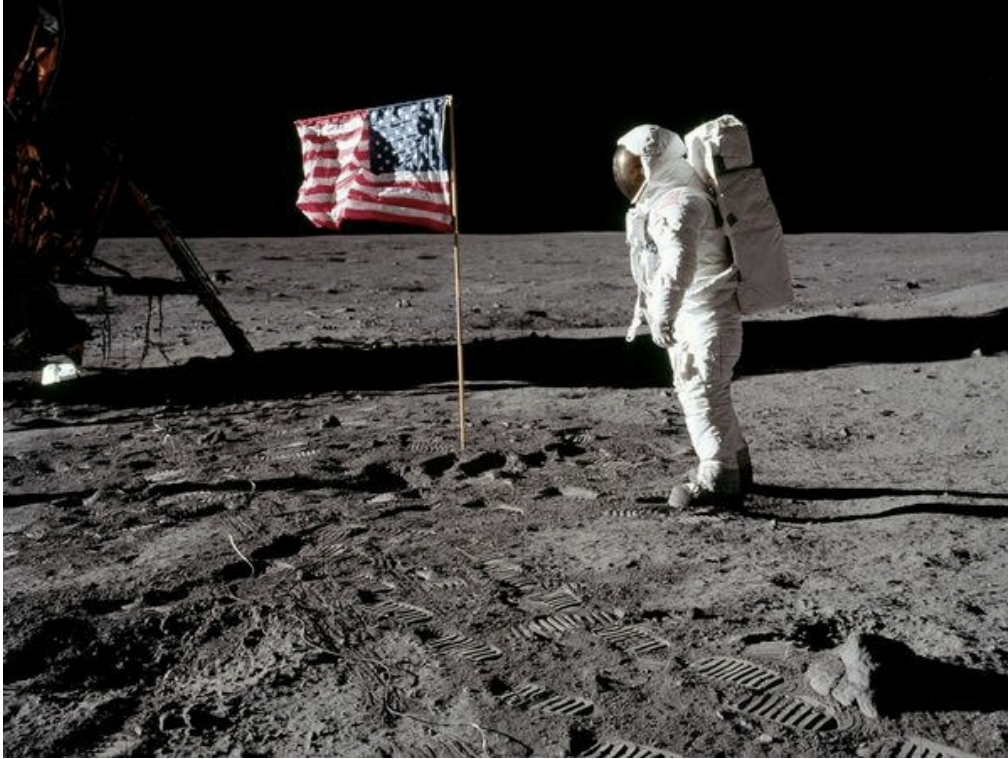
¹ J. Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 56.

individuality through the mediums of painting and performance, which involve the movement of my own body to create its own rituals and mark-making. These rituals then serve as signifiers of my own body, similar to a finger print; individual and differentiated in nature.

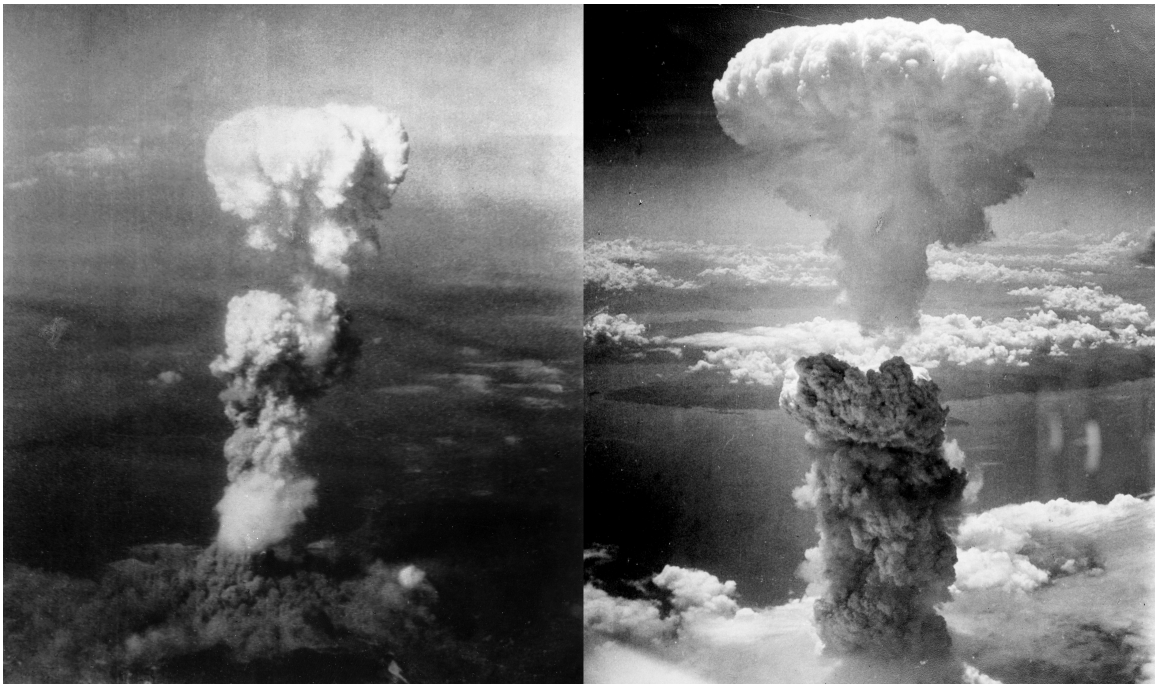
CLUES

In 'Paris Under Occupation', Jean Paul Sartre states how photography excludes a larger reality by cropping the image and presenting it as the truth.² Sartre's idea of the construction of truth still holds in our times. Our collective memory generalizes and believes certain visuals and forms as indicative of truth without consideration to the whole picture. Man's landing on the Moon, the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings, the Syrian child being washed up on the shores of Turkey, shooting a citizen in the Vietnam War and two planes hitting the Twin Towers are etched in our memories as events that define entire eras. But these are isolated incidents in themselves that do not give us the entire picture of recent history. What it misses out on are the individuals who were affected by these events and their perspectives.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Paris Under the Occupation*. (Sartre Studies International 4.2, 1998). 1–15



2. AP, Armstrong, Neil, Man's landing on the Moon, 1969



3. Atomicheritage.org, Levi, Charles, Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings, 1965



4. Turkey Reuters, Syrian child washed ashore, 2015



5. Adams, Eddie, Shooting a citizen in the Vietnam war, 1972



6. Reuters, Adair, Sean, Attack on the Twin Towers, 2001

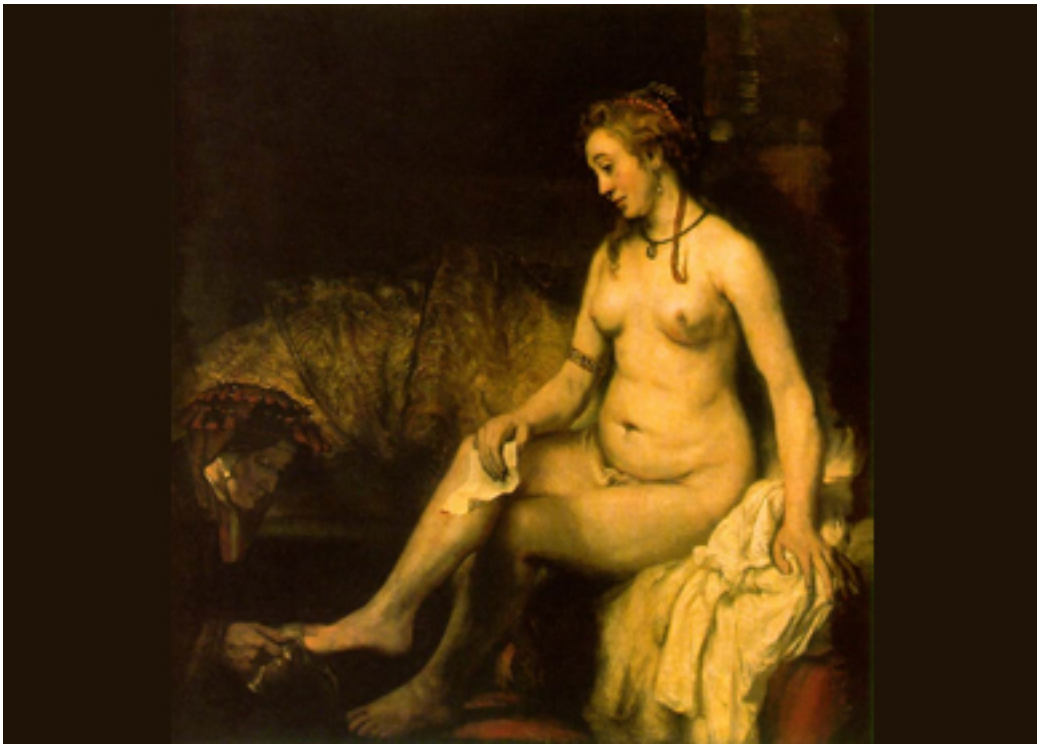
This personal individual portrayal of reality is what I enact in my own work, as they stem from a very personal place of identity and self-perception. Thus, I end up reconstructing my identity through deconstructed forms that I extract from traditional arts and contemporize them through painting and performance; by speaking to my own state of mind as I build a distinct vocabulary of movement and mark making.

In terms of the sign vs. signifier, I am interested in playing with codes and an inversion of codes, which is Saussure's idea of *symbol*³. The word has been used to designate the linguistic sign, or more specifically, what is here called the signifier. The

³ Reading from Saussure – full citation to be updated

symbol which is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond, between the signifier and the signified.

When one encounters my work, the idea that comes to mind is not of what is shown but how much is abstracted. It is not then the nude being shown but rather the side of Bathsheba not being presented. It is the side of the intangible concept being presented by the works is what one instantly starts to construct through the already deconstructed visuals in front: the passivity of Bathsheba, the despondency.



7. Rembrandt van Rijn, Bathsheba at her Bath, Oil on Canvas, 56"x 56", 1654

While the viewers only encounter Bathsheba from a place of removed observation, I speak to the interiority of the subject at hand, and what happens when Bathsheba looks back at the viewer. What she sees and her identity as a woman under

a patriarchal lens. This reverses the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. If her femininity went beyond the curves of her female body would she still seem to hold the place of an ornament in a work of art? Her view is the missing part of the picture we do not see and this internal realm of the subject is the conversation I look to raise from my own point of view.

PERFORMANCE

While ornament on architecture was equated to the fabric that made up the tents of the Bedouins of Arabia; the Arabs considered these tents as monuments. The monuments are now adorned literally as fabrics for festivals and occasions and have come to develop a symbolism of their own. These fabrics of delicately woven silks and embellished tunics define luxury and beauty that speak of the artistic tradition of an entire culture. To take this fabric and move in it in ways that breaks away from familiarity and creates dissonance is the space I look to insert myself into. The experience focuses not on the spectacle, but rather breaking it up to find a space for the personal.

In my performance video, I have taken this fabric and stitched a suit with it that could be taken to resemble a body bag as the closest example. It is still a beautiful woven silk in the colors of red and gold but the idea of its use being taken as a symbol of luxury is switched to one of suffocation. There is no opening in the bag that can be accessed and being inside the bag I can no longer look at anything except the inside of this luxurious garment. The fabric of *Jamavar* literally stands for 'body robe', ("Jama" being robe and "var" being chest, metaphorically meaning body). It is an item of beauty and luxury in Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures and stands out for its patterns and colors that are an extension of patterning used in architecture from the region. It is

a fabric worn at festive occasions and was popular amongst the aristocracy in the days of the Mughal Emperors in South Asia. This fabric is not only a sign of luxury but also serves as the basis of determining hierarchy in architecture, miniature paintings, clothing and décor. Any miniature painting from South Asia depicts societal importance of a character through the elaborate composition of his or her clothing. The miniatures depicted in *Adventures of Amir Hamza*, for their historical relevance as folklore and as a painted work of art are good examples of this. The stories and illustrations from these works have been passed down through the centuries in South Asian Muslims, irrespective of nationality. To take a cultural symbol of luxury and elegance and defamiliarize it is a move, which speaks to the politicized nature of identity and symbols. Despite the evolution of meaning it has already been through, the *Jamavar* yet goes through another metamorphosis that leads it towards absurdity.

I have performed this piece in two places. The first was performed at a family home in Lahore, Pakistan, the city of my birth. The other was performed in New York City, the place I moved to and now identify as a second home. The difference between the two pieces is not just of location and fabric, but also of movement, inspired by the city I was performing in. The two parts of the video playing side by side are crucial to their read as are their sounds which speak to the experience of the moment the performance was taking place in. The performance in a particular space on the rooftop of a house with very low walls encapsulates a slow meditative movement that is in tune with the sounds of nature and the distant urban life. The lack of urgency projects it into a space where the movement is completely internal and reactive to nothing outside except the props that I have chosen to take into the bag with me. The movement in this

video called Red Scape is similar to the one in *Gold Scape* (New York) in terms of being performed on the ground, which greatly limits my natural idea of movement. However, they differ greatly in their speed of performance and the nature of movements being made.

The Red Scape was performed with objects inside my red costume and took place in a private setting that was familiar to me, signifying a place that was not 'here'. The ambiguity and absurdity evoked through movement was a form of beauty that took apart the traditional use of the fabric using movement and commented on the deconstruction of its cultural significance. However, the idea of performing on the ground and limiting my movement in these performances was to bring to the fore the idea of a struggle encountered when faced with an alternate state of being. You no longer associate with a human body that stands and walks towards or away from something. Instead, you are faced with a form that moves on its own and exists in a constant state of becoming.

Throughout the performance I am only concerned with the interior of the fabric and my sole concern for the next move stems from the last as I find new ways of moving and keep falling for the learned moves of the body to react in certain ways. The addition of props was a way for me to interact differently with the internal space that I had created within the bag in order to have a struggle that speaks to my concerns of going against the grain of the ritualistic movements of the body. I had to de-familiarize myself with the environment I was so used to. Through the costume and with objects I had found around my home, I wanted to recreate an idea of a struggle that I deal with internally being in a new place while carrying baggage from my own history. The

movements, the space and the objects all needed to find a new meaning in this interior space of the costume, referring to my own inner emotions of displacement and familiarity.

“The universe unfolds in the body, which is its mirror and its creature.”⁴

I consider my body to be an impressionable sponge that carries time and space through its action and being. A ritualistic movement occurs that leans towards a familiar place in the past of the body’s interaction with the world. To then completely remove it from the familiar realm of walking and restricting it to the ground, I am breaking the old rituals of the body and creating new ones where my body language is no longer being processed or logically resolved by the brain. What it is aware of; however, is the presence of a low ledge on the roof that is no longer in sight and I only come across it as I collide with it while moving through space. Being restricted in movement not only poses a threat physically, but also symbolically as internal struggle points towards unseen falls that come with the unfamiliarity of surroundings.

To have this movement and openness of space with a very specific choice of location is where the performance leads from the Red Scape to the Gold Scape. However, the familiar movement of standing up, where I literally and metaphorically find my feet and take a more familiar stance in the performance, albeit shaky and unsure, marks the end of both performances.

The Gold Scape being performed in New York City speaks to the stark contrast in the physical place chosen for the performance and the symbolism it brings. With the Statue of Liberty in the background, the symbol of immigration is chosen to be a second

⁴ Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*. (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 125

performer in the video. With my own history of migration to the United States, the view of Lady Liberty against a live, performing female body from another shore is where the dialogue now shifts from the private scene of my home in another country, to a very public place of familiarity and displacement. As I perform in Battery Park, a public space with people walking by, I no longer need props on the inside of my costume. The people passing by and the police officer making a surprised yet unaffected appearance defines the video and what interiority in New York City has always meant for me. It is one of the most active, densely populated cities in the world and to see a street performer usually calls for nothing more than a second glance. I no longer need props to de-familiarize myself in this place. The place itself is not familiar to me and being out in public I am still invisible. The wind only adds to the symbolism of the piece with its harshness and speed providing me with the element of struggle that then consumes my entire performance. As my body regains a familiar way of reacting to the wind and ritualizes its movement, so I find myself acclimating to a new place as an immigrant.

My movements in the performance vary with the speed of the wind. As the wind picks up and I try to capture it in order to make more room for myself within the gold fabric, I find the light being caught by the fabric captivating on the inside. The snow on the ground and the speed of the wind at the riverside indicates a cold and harsh scenario as I struggle on the inside of the fabric to keep the fabric and therefore myself from moving. The movements are forced and more repetitive as I familiarize with the space. The movements no longer speak of an exploration, but rather of resignation. It is not comfortable, there isn't much room to maneuver, and as I try to catch the wind in the

fabric or control my surroundings for even just a second, I end up rolling around in its force.

Again, the performance ends with my body gaining the familiar stance of standing up but this time it goes against the direction of the wind as it blinds me by throwing the fabric against my face. The struggle is mundane and yet more poignant. It is recognizable and yet unfamiliar. Who hasn't fought with the winds and gales living in New York? However, for my body to find a new way of dealing with its circumstance and ritualizing movement in order for my body to redefine its own parameters of resistance, creates an identity that addresses the self-created ritual through displacement.

Both these performances were not just an exploration and extension of the symbols involved, but also spoke to my concerns of my own identity of being Muslim, a woman and an immigrant moving between the two places so different from each other. There is a familiarity in the movement of the body between the two performances as I create a new vocabulary of movement in learning to maneuver my way in unfamiliar places. The patterned fabrics serve as an indicator of culture as I work through these obstacles. This personalization of rituals through movement and form carries over into my paintings.



8. Red Scape, video still, 6 min 14 sec (loop)



9. Gold Scape, video still, 5 min 49 sec (loop)

PAINTING

I approach my paintings through the same ritualized manner of movement that I deal with in performance. It starts from taking something out of the familiar and de-familiarizing it to give it a new meaning. In my paintings I create organically growing patterns that are abstracted from a miniature source and create spaces that exist between fact and fiction. My works are inhabited by references pointing to more than a single narrative. In taking from the forms of Islamic art, I not only relate to my own history and background, but also to an entire culture that I belong to.

The sense of place and displacement is explored through the self in my work. As I take one square inch of a miniature from the folio of the *Hamzanama* and blow it up to more than six thousand times its original, I am not just representing the miniature but miniaturizing the viewer by it. This is how I turn Bathsheba inside out and make the

viewer lose their place in the context of subject and patron. In some ways, this is how I deal with the historical context of post-colonialism; where the 'Orient' is no longer a term defined by the 'Occident' or the West. The tables have now been turned by the Eastern miniature form presenting itself as being larger than life and confronting its audience.

The space in my paintings is explored through symbols, patterns, and the medium of paint itself where my body is actively involved in recreating them. I use symbols that are fragmented in meaning and form. Deconstruction is the tool which redefines their existence, addressing the concerns of stereotypes and cultural identity. As I pull forms from miniature paintings and use fragments to recreate a large scale abstract painting, I reverse the gaze of the viewer by no longer illustrating a myth but rather recreating a space defined by the movement of my wrist and my own sensibilities shaped by gender and displacement. My interaction with the world around me reaffirms my idiosyncratic relationship with it and my fractured understanding of it sets up the portrayal of my fragmented self that always exists in more than one place at a time. In a world that is strife with political and cultural tension, these fragmented constructs have come to define my own existence.

I establish myself in many ways, including gestures and patterns as part of my expression. This expression can be seen in the visual planes of paintings with their arabesque like forms that come from a history of calligraphy and ornamentation in Islamic and South Asian Art and Architecture. However, they are individualized and stylized to represent the time in which they are created as they multiply in number and presence, like the unfolding of the arabesque. Thus, there is meaning in the

apprehended sense of place created in my paintings that respond to natural instinct and intuition.

By subverting and de-familiarizing the forms of miniatures, I create my own vocabulary of mark-making that continues to recur in my work in new ways. Thus, as I create paradoxes through form and content, I simultaneously attempt to introduce a new familiarity to my work.

Poetic archeology is enacted in the work by baring the form and pulling it apart to examine on its own and enabling the viewer to see it by magnifying it. I am taking from the tradition of intimate viewership and presenting it on the large scale. I feel this to be in line with Sikander's words about her work:

"I selected one image from my vocabulary of forms and shifted the scale from 10 inches to 10 feet to mimic 'big is better,' but also to see what would happen to the image itself: would it become more confrontational? More noticeable? More painterly? More precise? More stylized? Less exotic? More accessible? Less feminine? More macho? More minimal? More economical, less precious? And so forth... I was also trying to figure out a way to navigate spatial constructs."⁵

Where my work differs from Sikander's though, is that her work remains in the realm of representation and illustration and mine escapes definition. The way I construct my marks are through a reverse practice of painting forms that bring forth the lines between them that exist only through the void between two forms. It is a deliberate attempt to go against the tradition of drawing out a miniature to the last detail before you paint in it.

To create forms in this reverse manner is to liberate forms from the constraints of

⁵ Anna J. Sloan, *Embodied Space: The Miniature As Attitude: Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (London: Asia House, 2006)

tradition and bring them into the contemporary realm, which then makes them mine. To use them now to speak of my inner struggles is how I see these forms as an important part of my work. The forms start to follow a pattern that mimics miniature painting in the way the ritualistic movement of the wrist makes the pattern and how the breath is controlled in order to not let one form touch another. One mark leads to the next and nothing is pre-determined. Only the source is given, which has an autobiographical reference of cultural heritage. But the way the mark is enlarged and personalized in my work is where the forms are filtered through the subconscious. This is not only an act that I apply to miniatures but also to marks that I have made in my own studio in the form of studio notes that then get enlarged and take their place in paintings as if being seen through a magnifying glass. Thus, my work becomes more and more self-referential as the paintings progress, struggling to express an inner voice that yearns for its own identity through the deconstruction of ritual and history.

FRAGMENTED PLACES

In my deconstruction of historical miniatures, in particular the composition, form and scale of the works contest the idea of 'traditional' miniature. A mixture of artistic intuition and recognizable historical forms, are reconstructed to form a contemporary narrative.

In comparison to how traditional miniatures were constructed, which was illustrated in fine lines to the last detail before being filled and rendered; my work starts in vague concept without much planning. I approach the canvas with a few forms that I extract from historical miniatures, architectural patterns and geometric shapes and begin abstracting. This idea of deconstructing and abstracting forms reference the

resistance to the tyranny of binary choices that confront me – modern or traditional, local or international, form or content, aesthetically seductive or conceptually rigorous, conventional or unorthodox. These paradoxes set up a conversation for my own concerns to emerge in relation to my identity and how struggles against binary choices play out in my own life and are mimicked on my canvases.

As I create forms that carry the aesthetic of miniature painting as seen in the white curves on the upper half of the canvas in *Serenity*, an internal logic of painting kicks in. There is strong need to balance out the white with the spills and pours in the lower half of the canvas in order to fight the controlled articulated mark-making on top. These spills are drawn from a previous vocabulary of painting that has always emerged whenever the need for control and contrivance needs to be let up.

To balance the pulsation created by the architectural patterns in the red background of the work, the gold disc needs to appear in order to bring back balance that is lost. This disc is not only a geometric shape but also serves as a cultural marker in all its glory of gold, used for decorative purposes in South Asian and Islamic cultures. However, in order for the gold disk to not just be a stagnant, decorative placeholder, an area is withheld at its edge where the spills are not covered and fragile, cellular growth disrupts the solid surface of the disc. This growth not only negates the geometric precision of the disc, but also mystifies its identity. This struggle to keep from conforming to a single identity is what I look for in my paintings as patterns start to work against each other and narratives get created: fighting the need to view patterns as just ornamentation.



10. Serenity, ink and acrylic, 72" x 96", 2016

Through extracting fragments and reconstructing them, I create paradoxes that are inherent in the life choices of an immigrant. These paradoxes serve as a hyper reality in my work that is now far removed from its original intent and continues to redefine itself to a new reality.

My work deals with beauty that grows organically and constantly slips in and out of the realms of recognition. I subvert and de-familiarize patterns by using stylized forms that avoid a 'stagnant' read. The subversive quality of these ecstatic patterns leads to the infinite deferral of meaning, which points towards the idea of shifting identities.

I make room for ambiguity in order for a new reality to occur through knowledge of the familiar. A spill is no longer a spill, a circle can take on multiple meanings and these curved forms that are created by a certain way of moving my wrist and use of my breath are no longer just a reference to miniature, but to me. This is how the work relates to my own identity of being a hybrid of the East and the West that Said refers to as the "other" in a post-colonial world, where identity is also defined through displacement.

The forms end up being so stylized and abstracted that they no longer represent what they originally stood for but point towards a newer meaning instead. This simulacrum builds off of what Baudrillard calls the 'Symbolic Order'. Baudrillard theorizes that signs are limited and fixed by rank, duty and obligation. With them reality is not an issue, but the unbreakable and reciprocal symbolic order is concerned with reality and is simulation's polar opposite. According to Baudrillard, for postmodern simulation and simulacra, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real."⁶

Similarly in my work the forms retain a stylized identity through a repetition of their use, going from one painting to the next, but their context remains ambiguous. You might not know where the forms are coming from but definitely know that they're not from 'here', being depicted through the 'ideal' vs. the 'real'. This is a mirror to how I view myself as I move through the increasingly global world and how identity revolves around being from another place. My work operates continually referring to a source that itself is now lost in the quest for new meaning through deconstruction.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994), 2

In the deconstruction of traditional arts and forms there is both a sense of renewal and loss. In pointing out that the forms are from somewhere else, one also points out that they are not from here.

Sherrie Levine talks about her work, which consists of photographs made by re-photographing existing photographs of other artists. In a series of six nude photographs by Edward Weston, of his young son that Levine then re-photographed and presented as her work, a friend of Levine's remarked that they made him want to see the originals. The originals would then make you want to see the actual boy and in doing so the art would disappear. This incurs the hope for my art to play the role of a cultural symbol, similar to Levine's photographs, which inspire one to pay attention to the individual, rather than just its signifier.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

The effects of being a Pakistani Muslim woman in a post 9/11 US make religion a very sensitive part of my identity. When I think of Pakistan, I do not see the demonized version of the country projected in popular news. Rather, I see a home where my loved ones are and where my childhood was spent. The dichotomy of perception has over time, framed my outlook on life and given me a very specific understanding of the world where my own 'fractured' standing is in a constant state of flux. There is a double consciousness at play, a term W. E. B. Dubois coins in his essay, *Strivings of the Negro People*

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness,”⁷

Since my arrival in the US, my view of Pakistan and my own Muslim identity has been affected in unexpected ways. The country that I call home now is a sight that is far removed from its reality and the separation of the real from the ideal is what drives the imagery of my work.

I take concepts and elements from a classical art practice and combine it with a western language of painting to create a new hybrid reality. My cultural upbringing continually informs my work in order to raise questions of identity through fragmentation and deconstruction to create a place of “in-between”. There are many contemporary artists that my work is in dialogue with in terms of the construction of identity and deconstruction. Shazia Sikander, Ellen Gallagher, Imran Qureshi, Huma Mulji, Ali Banisadr and a late modern Pakistani artist Zahoor-ul Akhlaq instantly come to mind.

In pursuit of my personal investigation of self, society, religion and gender politics I abstract forms taken from classical references in order to remain in conversation with the history of painting of both the East and the West and assert my own hybridity. Through an understanding of the “double-consciousness” I am well aware of the importance that decoration and ornamentation hold in the eyes of the West regarding my own culture. Thus, I use this idea of the ornament and create patterned paintings that no longer abide by any rules of decoration or of mimicking their origin of miniatures or Islamic architecture.

⁷ W. E. Du Bois, *Strivings of the Negro People* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia Library, 1996)



11. Secrets, shellac, tar and acrylic. 8" x 8", 2016



12. Diptych, gold sumi ink, 6" x 8", 2016

The works Diptychs and Secrets are examples of such extractions from culture; so far removed that they longer relate to their origins. The multiple influences of form, process, medium and movement in these works refer to nothing more than my own studio process. They entail influences that inform my sensibilities. In dealing with materials like golden black sumi ink, the congealed state in which I found the gold pigment, stuck to the inside of the neck of the sumi ink bottle instead of being dispersed resulted in a new form taking over. The separation of the gold got smeared on to the surface and the black followed in order to complete the duo that was supposed to exist together but not in the manner they happened to end up in.

Similarly, as I was playing with tar, the viscosity of the medium urged some experiments with materials such as shellac for their characteristics of transparency and shine. As I layered these materials in *Secrets* and laid down the tar the way I would use ink in paintings on paper, a completely new form emerged. This fluidity of form to change meaning through different mediums is reason enough for this study to be translated into a 96" x 120" painting that is underway.

My work falls into the fourth of successive phases of the image according to Baudrillard. In pulling from a classical source and representing it in a context different from its original meaning there is a sense of loss that is evoked. The final image no longer bears relation to its origins and becomes an ideal form in itself. This identity of displacement and reconstruction through form and content are how I view my own self.

Double-consciousness is at play very deliberately and spiritedly sneaks out of the realm of stereotypes as the paintings no longer stand for just beauty and decoration in their patterning but create their own history through my studio process.

To see myself in terms of societal and political patterns where the word 'Islamic' operates as both language and visual form is the place that arouses my interest in the potential duality of meaning in a single pattern. Taking existing patterns out of their original contexts of being a part of a whole and having them operate as signifiers in their deconstructed state also gives them an ambiguity that opens them up to interpretations that go beyond just good and bad. I see a mirroring of this ambiguity and generalization in the understanding of the culture I come from in the world today. Thus, Derrida's

concept of deconstruction is where my work enters these patterns as I take it further into the realms of Baudrillard's *Simulacra*:

"When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, the neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence."⁸

To see events in terms of patterns is how I approach the imagery in my work. Building on my own vocabulary of patterns and integrating them into a surface image where the pattern becomes both the subject and form is the idea of the Arabesque that my work aspires towards. This concept of the arabesque resonates with the Muslim identity just as much as the word 'terrorist' does in today's world. This duality of identity is what I seek to resolve in my work through the subversion of the decorative towards a political end.

THE ADVENTURES OF AMIR HAMZA

Where myth and history morph!

Traditionally, historians have recorded events of the past, either in writing or by passing on oral traditions. Others, in turn, have attempted to answer historical questions through the study of such written documents and oral accounts. One of these historical traditions has produced the *Hamzanama*, also known as *The Tales of Amir Hamza*, the forgotten hero of Islam and uncle of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). The epic gives a unique insight into a lost Indo-Islamic courtly world. Although, the Hamza epic was originally a

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994), 12-13

Persian production set in the Middle East, the Urdu version shows how far the epic had been re-imagined into a South Asian context through the course of many years of sub-continental retelling. Though the original Mesopotamian place names survive, the world depicted is not that of early Islamic Iraq but that of 18th century late Mughal India, which gives the images the quality of being timeless as they get reconstructed through the centuries in accordance to the culture of the time. This is exactly what inspired me to bring Hamzanama into my current practice by deconstructing both the text and compositional elements of the works.

In June 2002, as Pentagon strategists were making their plans for the invasion of Iraq, a short distance away down Washington's National Mall, the Freer-Sackler Galleries at the Smithsonian were showing one of the most interesting exhibitions of Islamic art seen in the US for years; illustrations from the *Hamzanama*. Ironically, the show was made up of illustrations of a story largely set in the very Iraqi cities that would shortly find themselves as targets for the Pentagon's munitions.

Interestingly, the book has been widely reviewed and read in the US and the UK, two countries with a growing problem of rampant Islamophobia and massive ignorance about the Islamic world. This makes the work even more relevant today, when knowledge about the region is generally only seen in a negative light. The narrative opens in Ctesiphon, not far from Baghdad, and encompasses places now in modern Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan; countries which the US and its allies regard as little more than breeding grounds for terrorism. The misunderstandings around these geographical locations bring me closer to the concept of generalized identities depicted through a fragmented art form.



13. Arghan Dev brings the chest of armor to Hamza, 67.5cm x 52.5cm, c1570

As I take from a very specific source in the *Hamzanama* and recreate it on a scale several thousand times its original size, I not only look at the miniature through my own associations to those places but, in fact, reinterpret them anew. As I take fragments from the miniature to form my own narrative I see the same being done to an entire culture, defined by fragments of news on terrorism that we come across here in the west. As mystery and myth morph into determining a new reality for these regions, art holds the power to mimic the same idea and emphasize its effects. As I take from a small image to create a scene that speaks to my own sensibilities, the subtle conflict of resistance and dominance create a chaotic effect on the canvas that is now formed partly from the miniature and partly from my own vocabulary of mark-making that has

been enlarged.



14. Persevere, ink, 71" x 95", 2016

As I create these floating blobs of inks that come in contact with the swirling forms from the miniature there is defiance to recede by those erased grey marks that have already been pushed back but refuse to disappear. The painting has its own history and each mark is here to stay. This is partly because of how I've treated the surface of the painting to retain each and every mark so there is no room for correction, and partly because the history or mark-making on the surface speaks to how I utilize mark making in my studio to go from simple gestures as studies to large-scale paintings.

The following are examples of these marks that started as studies on paper and got blown up to several thousand times their original size digitally, eventually entering my paintings as marks referencing their own history. While I choose marks to carry forward based on what a painting needs formally, it is the shape of the marks that ultimately decides whether they serve to represent my own internal reality. As a small study these marks were silent yet violent in their emotional content. The idea of a drop on a paper that is irreversible has an effect on the psyche of it being a permanent marker of an event that has occurred and has a certain sense of melancholy attached to it for me. As I translate this mark to magnified presence, the drop turns into a glob that is almost a cartoonish representation of its origin. This also speaks to the way miniature forms change relevance. The fragile mark on paper turning into a massive sign for itself is an unmistakably obvious call for attention. To use these drops on a large-scale painting and have them operate as a repeating pattern turns to show how an intimate mark can be daunting when enlarged and presented as a confrontational form.



15. Silence, ink and acrylic, 15"x 10", 2015

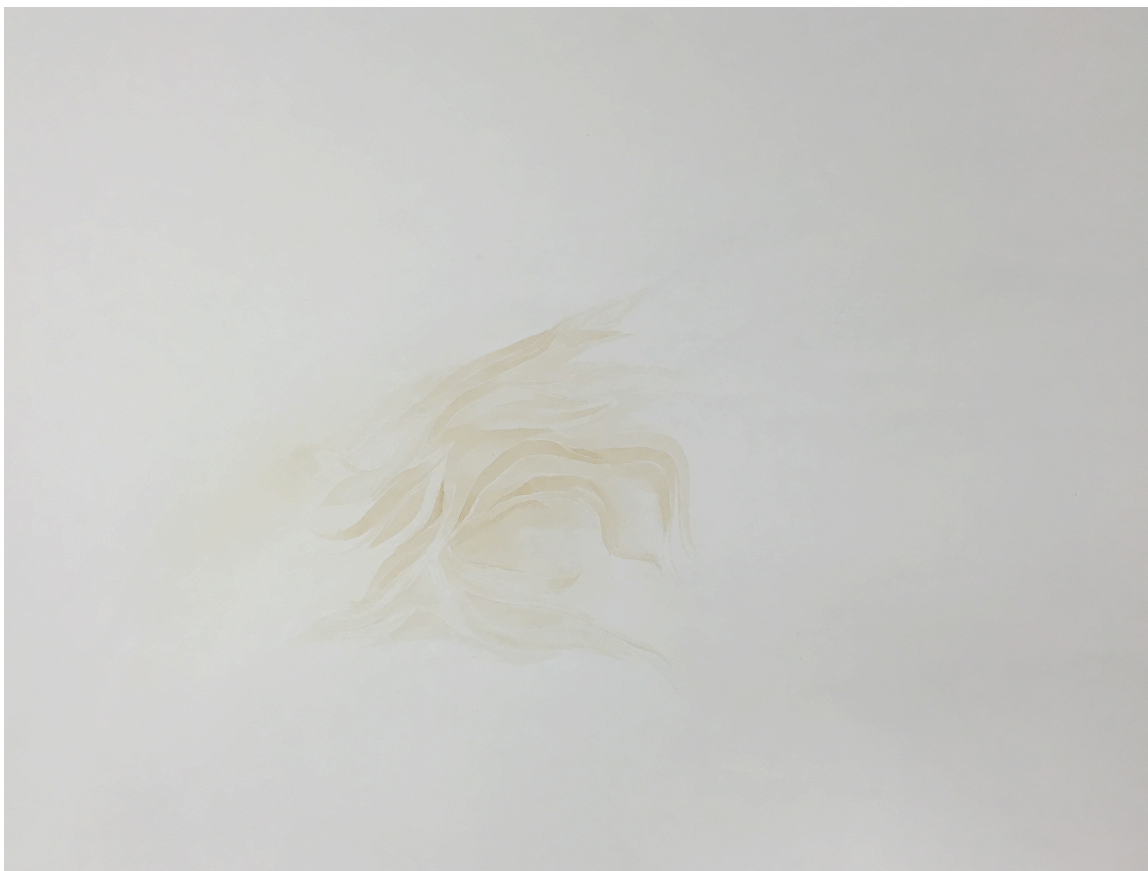


16. Detail, Silence enlarged, 14"x 8.5", 2016.

CONCLUSION

Eventually, a question of identity is presented in my work through the abstracting of forms and defining them through my own studio practice. Intimate drawings end up being paintings, while performance and movement continually add content to my work. It is through the process of a ritualized movement of my body and hand that my work gains its form and in turn creates a new identity. Sensibilities gained through experiences provide me tools to play with materials as I proceed to recreate small, intimate gestures into large-scale works. My works contain all the ingredients of their own history, which in turn proceed to represent the complexity of my own of identity and being.

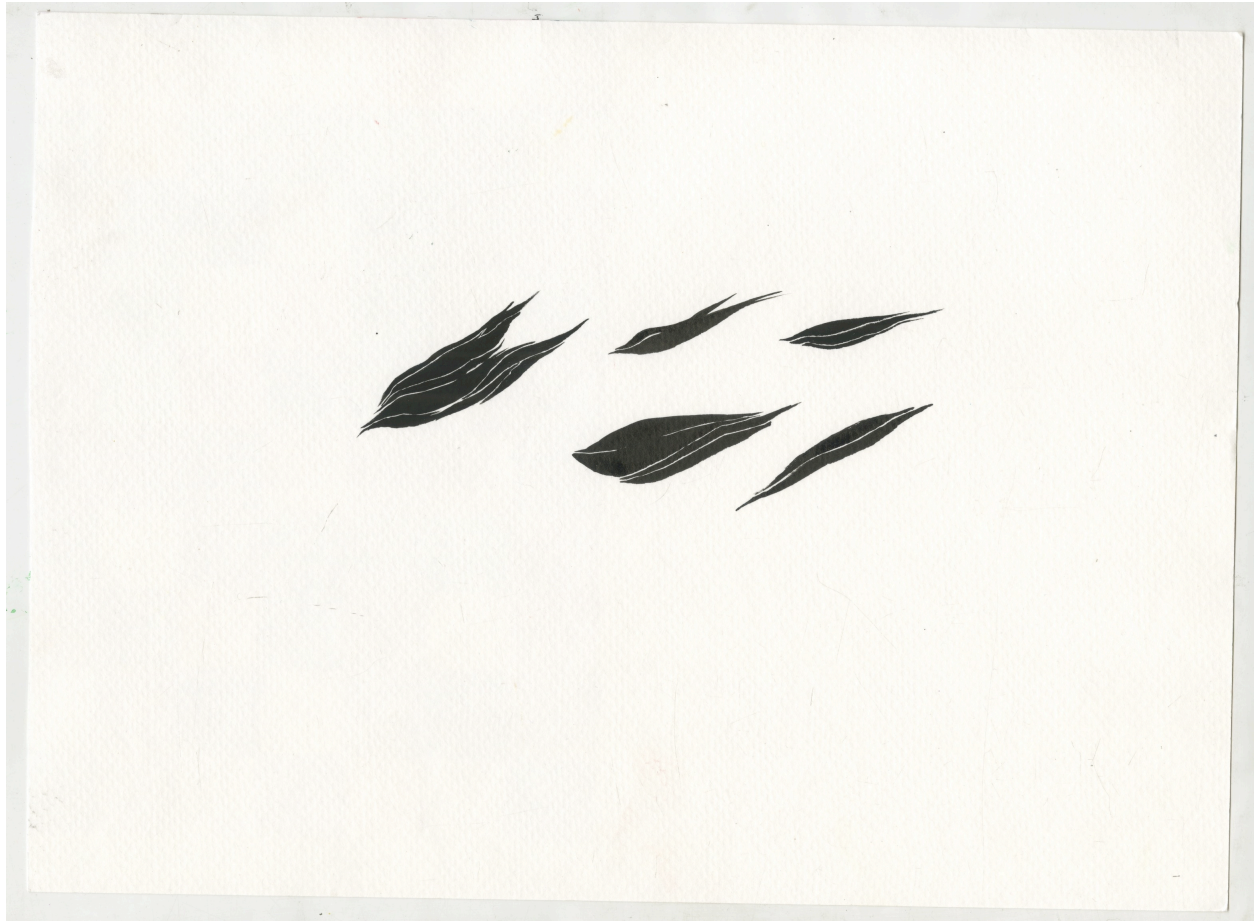
The following slides are examples of self-referential process based works which have dictated my entire thesis show in their flow of pattern and femininity.



17. Time, tea, 20" x 30", 2015



Presence, gouache, 8.5" x14", 2016



18. Dew, ink, 8.5" x 11", 2015



19. Installation Shots, 2016

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahluwalia Pal, *Origins and Displacement: Working Through Derrida's African Connections* (Social Identities 13.3, 2007)
- W. E. Du Bois, *Strivings of the Negro People* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia Library, 1996)
- Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995)
- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994)
- Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998)
- Douglas Crimp, *October: The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism* (Boston: MIT Press, 1980)
- Robert C. Hobbs, *The Arabesque* (Fall, 2015)
- Kevin Schilbrack, *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004)
- Quddus Mirza, *Presenting the Absent: TNS - The News on Sunday* (Feb. 2016)
- Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* (New York: Viking Press, 1974)
- Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)
- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Paris Under the Occupation* (Sartre Studies International 4.2, 1998)

John William Seyller and W. M. Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 2002)

Anna J. Sloan, *Embodied Space: The Miniature As Attitude: Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (London: Asia House, 2006)

Som Prakash Verma, *Interpreting Mughal Painting: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009)